



Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2003
WWW.USDOJ.GOV

CRM
(202) 514-2008
TDD (202) 514-1888

MISSISSIPPI WOMAN SENTENCED IN SCHEME TO DEFRAUD AMTRAK

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A federal judge today sentenced a Mississippi woman to 71 months in jail and three years of supervised release for her filing of a wrongful death lawsuit involving the 1993 derailment of Amtrak's *Sunset Limited* passenger train.

U.S. District Court Judge Henry Wingate in Jackson, Mississippi, also ordered Deborah Theresa Meeks to pay \$1,060,000 restitution – the amount she received in settlement of a fraudulently filed wrongful death lawsuit. Meeks was convicted on three counts of mail fraud and three counts of money laundering in November 2002, following a five-day jury trial.

Forty-seven people died in the *Sunset Limited* passenger train derailment outside of Mobile, Ala., on Sept. 22, 1993. The government proved at trial that Meeks prepared and filed false marriage documents which stated that she had married an Amtrak employee five weeks before he was killed in the *Sunset Limited* crash. The employee died without a will, and within a week of his death, Meeks successfully petitioned to be designated administratrix of the estate and then filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Amtrak and others. Meeks perpetuated her scheme with the assistance of others, who falsely claimed that the marriage had been performed.

Meeks received a settlement for \$1,060,000 from Warrior and Gulf Navigation, the owner of the river barge involved in the derailment and a defendant in her wrongful death action. She received approximately \$523,000 after attorneys' fees and expenses, and used the proceeds of her scheme to purchase a home and gifts for family members.

Meeks' conviction was the result of an investigation spanning several years by agents from the Amtrak Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations. The case was prosecuted by Robertson Park and Joshua Drew, attorneys from the Fraud Section of the Criminal Division at the U.S. Department of Justice.

###